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World Chronicle

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GUEST: **Dr. Wally N'DOW**
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United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (HABITAT II)

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HABITAT II

Dr. Wally N'DOW, Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Human Settelments (HABITAT II), discusses the goals of the conference. The deterioration of living conditions the world over has prompted the international community to convene HABITAT II to confront the emerging urban crisis and initiate urgent worldwide action to improve shelter and living environments. Most of the actions agreed to in the Rio Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit) can be achieved through the participation of local authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), business and communities. The conference will concentrate on all aspects of human life. Dr. N'Dow believes that, when given assistance and support, people are often able to provide their own shelter.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is World Chronicle.

As we approach the end of the 20th century, more than 1 billion people in almost all parts of the world are poor and lack adequate housing; more than 100 million are literally homeless. What can the international community do to manage this crisis, which all countries, rich and poor alike, now share? Our guest today has a special interest in the issue of human habitation. He is Dr. Wally N'Dow, Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, or HABITAT II. Joining me to talk with Dr. N'Dow are Ricardo Alday of the Mexican News Agency and Judith Aita of USIA Press Service. Dr. N'Dow, welcome to World Chronicle.

N'DOW: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. N'Dow, I gather we call it HABITAT II because the first conference, HABITAT I, was held in Vancouver in 1976, and this one is to be held in Turkey, in Istanbul, in 1996, 20 years later. Tell us, in the 20 years, or 18 years or so between the conferences, since the last conference, has there been any improvement in the situation, or are there more homeless than there were, fewer homes filling the gap?

N'DOW: The improvements have been patchy, at best. In some situations, there has not been any improvement; in fact, there has been deterioration. And coupled with the fact that in recent times we've had great upheaval, great conflict, social and political, and the impact of these disruptions and conflicts has been tremendous on human habitation. So all told, one must be very cautious in talking with any optimism for the past 20 years. There has been some improvement: it's been patchy, and in some people's judgement there have been some deteriorations. You will realize that the situation with shelter and the human habitat over the years has tended to be very challenging for mankind, not the least of the reasons being the population explosion, both in the rural and urban areas; not the least of the reasons being the movement of people from the rural habitat into an urban environment, as if the whole of humanity is moving from the traditional village and township and hamlet to the cities.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean it's easier to solve the problem in rural areas than it is in urban conglomerates?

N'DOW: There are serious settlements problems in rural areas as well. But in the urban environment it is even more acute, the shortages are more acute. The consequences of the absence of shelter are more acute, sometimes even devastating. Because in the urban area -- we all know today that poverty is more gruelling in urban

situations than it is in rural areas. Coupled with all these factors, you begin to have an urbanization of poverty, if you will, which compounds the living environment of people, which destroys the habitat, which breeds hopelessness, which breeds alienation, and overspills into tensions and social conflicts, and then we have what we have today.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. N'Dow, governments are surely aware of the problem well enough. What does your conference plan to do? I mean, it's not a question of increasing the awareness of governments. So what, what do you -- what is your goal?

N'DOW: Our goal is to bring back the centrality of the issue of shelter, habitation and human settlements; bring back its centrality to the social agenda, if you will. As we move into the 21st century, it is quite obvious that the issue of housing, the issue of shelter, the issue of improving or preventing the further deterioration of the human habitat will be one of the most pressing challenges facing mankind.

AITA: Dr. N'Dow, the term HABITAT seems -- to me it conjures up housing. But is it only -- is this conference only about housing and providing a roof over people's heads, or is there more -- more other issues involved here?

N'DOW: Oh, there are many more issues. Housing is basic to the issue of the conference, but you have the whole environment, the whole human environment, the whole city environment, the conditions in which people live. Housing is but one factor. But you have health, you have infrastructure, you have traffic, you have pollution, you have violence, you have crime -- it's the whole human environment, if you will. But of course, one starts from the position of an acute shortage of housing for people, per se. And even where that housing exists, it's not in a situation and a condition that one can be comfortable with. You cannot consider that satisfactory housing in many, many of these exploding cities that we know of. So it's a whole human environment. That's why it's called HABITAT: habitat is more than just a roof and a shelter, it's more than just -- it's the whole environment around the human being where he happens or she happens to be living.

AITA: So this -- in other words, this conference will then go into city planning or zoning or highway building and that sort of thing as well?

N'DOW: Not so much going into them, in terms of highway building and so on, but the planning aspect of it, the infrastructure aspect of it, what needs to be put into place to improve the human environment, to improve people's living conditions so that they can live in a decent environment. It also goes into the area of even governance, municipalities, how people participate in their own governments in these cities and in these towns. And let me add that the importance of this to the future on the social agenda -- it is so crucial that the world today, heading the way it is for an urban future

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into the 21st century, this is where all of the development is going to take place, when more people move into the urban situation, as they seem to be doing in all regions, in all countries, large and small. People are moving from an earlier human environment of the towns and the villages and the hamlets into the cities, the big cities, even the mega-cities. Some of these mega-cities hold 15, 20 million people. And as we move into the future, this is where development or the absence of development will express itself. This is where the human condition really is going to be determined. This is the importance of this conference.

And, Mr. Littlejohns, you mentioned governments. Yes, governments are going to be very active, they're going to play a key role -- after all, this is the United Nations, and this is really an organization of member states, as it were. But this conference is going to be different in that the municipalities are going to be very critical in the process. They're going to be expressing their views, they're going to be discussing, they're going to be dialoguing, searching together for solutions. The private sector's going to be very important, because finally it's the private sector invariably that builds this housing, that builds the infrastructure, that contributes the jobs in these environments of cities, and so on. The non-governmental community is going to be very, very active. Individuals who have ideas, who have views on the matter, who have some expertise. We're seeking nothing less than a whole chorus of discussion and debate so that we heighten the consciousness of the world on this problem and its importance and try to do something about it 20 years out of Vancouver.

ALDAY: And how will you try to put the habitat issue at the centre of the social agenda when there are many social issues which are kind of competing, one over each other, to be at the centre of the social agenda?

N'DOW: Well, objectively, if you look at the social agenda, you need the building blocks. Can you build a social agenda when people don't have roofs over their heads? Can you really seriously talk about social progress and advancement of society and building of human welfare when housing is in such acute shortage, when it's non-existent in most places? So indeed, whatever strategies we are going to conceive of for the future, building the social agenda -- and the Social Summit is one big milestone on that road to the building of the social agenda, the United Nations Social Summit scheduled for Copenhagen next year -- the issue of housing and urbanization, the issue of what goes with the human habitat, those are going to be primary building blocks in that process.

ALDAY: Yes, you mentioned the Social Summit. It seems to me that all UN conferences in these days are pretty much dependant, one over each other. Let's say

HABITAT will be very dependant on what happens in Copenhagen, or what happened in Cairo, but what happens is if the previous conference, let's say that the social conference doesn't work as expected, --

N'DOW: Well, we have no reason to believe that the Social Summit will not work. And talk about a dependence, as you call it: we must go back to Rio; Rio changed everybody's mandate.

LITTLEJOHNS: The Conference on the Environment.

N'DOW: The Conference on the Environment in Brazil in 1992. This was a world event, it was a watershed conference for the United Nations. We changed everyone's mandate, basically, which set into motion thinking and action on these various fronts -- the social side, the women's side, HABITAT and the Population Conference. So indeed, we see these conferences as a continuum. One continuum from Rio. And all of these are now going to come home, if you will -- no pun intended -- to Istanbul, at the HABITAT Conference. This is finally where all of these conclusions and the recommendations are going to be expressed in the human environment, where people live. You cannot do very much for women if those women are not housed. There's very little you can do to support children if the children are homeless. There's very little you can do, in the end, to help in improving water and sanitation if the habitat where people live is not conducive to such improvement.

So you see that there is a continuum there, all the way from Rio to Istanbul. And the Secretary-General of the United Nations himself is urging that these conferences be seen as one continuum. And that's what we're trying to express.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. N'Dow, we read all the time about the development of new technologies. Is there any development in this area which could help to break the problem, crack the problem of homelessness and expedite the construction of homes?

N'DOW: One of the main features of this conference is that it will allow the sharing of experience and good practice. Good practice would include wherever people have experimented and tried out techniques and building methods, where they've experimented and tried out building materials and processes, so that this will be brought to the conference as we prepare. We are putting together a lot of information inventorying where these good examples exist. So that by the time we get to the conference and during the conference, these examples -- including techniques, faster building techniques, improved methodologies, good materials research -- this will be made available to the whole world. This is one aspect of this conference which is going -

LITTLEJOHNS: And the private sector is cooperating with you?

N'DOW: Very much so. The private sector is central. The research institutions, building organizations, associations of private sectors, associations of realtors, including the private sector even at the lower level -- I'm thinking of credit organizations that help poor people, that help women so that they can build their own housing. All these examples are going to be made available during the conference, and then it will be one of the main features of our work.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Dr. Wally N'Dow, Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, or HABITAT II.

AITA: Dr. N'Dow, how would you answer critics that would say that this conference is just another duplication of what was done in Rio at the Environment Conference and the Conference on Population and Development, that this is just a rehash of issues that are already being covered thoroughly? And over the years there's been so many preparation conferences and then the conference itself -- a lot of money spent in meetings. What makes this one different?

N'DOW: I think it's -- one must start by saying that Rio was an environmental conference in the sense that it addressed itself primarily to the green agenda, basically. HABITAT II is concerned with the human settlements aspect of the environment in greater detail. HABITAT II is also concerned with urbanization, which is the phenomenon for the future. HABITAT II is going to be addressing practical issues related to improving the human habitat, human shelter, human housing, improving the urban process, and facing the urban challenge, which is the challenge of the future of the world. Rio did not go that far, that's very important.

The population aspect, the Population Conference addressed only one facet of the HABITAT II objectives, it addressed the question of the numbers. We are more concerned with the housing that goes with those numbers, with the challenge that those numbers pose on the infrastructure that exists -- in most cities today the infrastructure is crumbling. You are dealing also with the whole circumstance in which the numbers exist, in the towns, in the cities, in the mega-cities. You are dealing with the human factor. You are dealing with governance, you're dealing with violence, you're dealing with civic responsibility, you're dealing with health and the social aspect of living in the new urban situation, you're dealing with jobs. So it goes very far, much further down the road than just a population conference or Rio, as Rio was essentially a conference on the green aspect of the environment, if you will. So this is the difference. And this, this is the future. The urban world is the future.

AITA: Is it the ideal future? I mean, you're saying -- you talk about urbanization, but is that really where you want to go? I mean, there are countries that can't feed themselves because land is being abandoned and people are moving into the cities. There is -- the countryside isn't supporting the cities. Is it necessarily the thing to be encouraged, or is it just something to be dealt with?

N'DOW: No, we have to deal with it. It's not a question of encouraging it. If you look at history, from ancient times it seems that mankind is moving willy-nilly from the rural to the urban. And we may want to try to stem that, and there have been efforts at stemming that by improving living conditions in the rural areas. But even in the rural areas, urbanization, towns are developing. Urbanization is taking place, and shelter is inadequate. But to be realistic, one is not encouraging an urbanization and an urban future; one is saying we have to face it. Because this seems to be the march of history, if you will, towards an urban future. And all regions of the world, in all epochs, have clearly demonstrated that the city is a very strong attractant, and it is becoming even more strong an attractant because of the conditions that exist in the city vis-a-vis the rural area. People feel that when they go to the cities, their lives and their lot will be improved. They're not always proven correct; most of the time they're disappointed. This is why we have the problems we have.

But in the modern world also, if you look today at the map, the political map, the map of political conflict in the world today, I bet you will find that most of the political strife and civil strife originates in these urban centres of exploding cities. Most of the alienation, the bewilderment, the violence, the abnormal and errant political behaviour comes from these big cities, where the populations who live there find it very difficult to cope -- a city cannot sustain and maintain these numbers! -- where even terrorism is expressing itself in many parts of the world today. Governments are being determined, made or unmade, in the urban environment, largely.

I do not know many governments today in nations small and large where the urban population is inactive politically, where they don't express their views one way or the other -- if they express their views through votes, that's fine, but if you express them otherwise, this is the beginnings of cataclysm.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. N'Dow, who's going to pay for the building of all these homes that are going to have to be built if the problem's going to be solved? We said in the introduction a billion people are more or less homeless. Poorer countries don't have the funds to do it. Where's the money coming from? And the so-called donor communities are already suffering from donor fatigue.

N'DOW: Primarily one must start from the premise that people will build their own homes if they're given a chance. The idea is --

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, that's fine in rural areas, but you can't do that in cities.

N'DOW: No, you can't.

LITTLEJOHNS: How many people can put up an apartment block, for instance?

N'DOW: If people get the jobs, if they get the training, and if they organize in communities, and if they get credit -- you've heard of the Grameen Bank, these are people, poor people, poor women, rural women in Asia, borrowing money and investing in their own situation, investing in housing. One is not talking of high quality, extremely high cost housing, one is talking of improving shelter. Basic shelter. No. People can invest in their own shelter. Many times our experience is when a family has a patch of land to which they have title, if they have the smallest means, they tend to try slowly and build a shelter. They can come back and improve it. That's one. And of course you have the private sector, who, in countries like the US and others, who invest in infrastructure for people to come and rent. There are various levels of investment here. I believe that we should not assume that governments are going to build the houses, because governments cannot build the houses. People must build, must be helped, must be given the wherewithal, the means, and the possibility and the conditions in which they can build their own shelter.

ALDAY: Do you have already an estimate of how much it will cost to implement the global Plan of Action for the first phase, which I understand will be from '96 to the year 2000?

N'DOW: No, we do not have those numbers; we are busy working with the numbers now. But I don't think the numbers are as important as the strategy. I don't think the costing of improving shelter is as important.

ALDAY: And what is the strategy?

N'DOW: The strategy is to facilitate participation of people, make conditions available, make low-cost materials available, inventory good practice, give them access to credit, help create jobs where jobs can be created so that people themselves -- give them access to land, provide the.... Today, in most places, the poor have no access to land. They have no access to land. And this conference is going to discuss that. Today in most places women cannot inherit -- when their mates pass away, or when their homes are broken they cannot stay in the house, they are turned out. This is the legal aspect. The conference is going to look at these various aspects. So it is not so much that we can put a dollar value and talk about billions. I believe that is the wrong way to go

about it. What we need is to create the conditions, legal, financial, and technical, and given the political support and the will, these are the things that we would require for people to address this question themselves.

AITA: You had so many "ifs" in there. If they get jobs, if there's resources, if, if, if. I got discouraged just listening to you!

N'DOW: Why --

AITA: Is there a discouraging feel -- there just seems like such a monumental -- there's just so many factors you have to go into, it just seems overwhelming.

N'DOW: Well, this is why we have a world conference! This is why we must all put our minds and our intellects and our resolves together to address those what you call "ifs." These are provided that the world has the will, provided that we can muster the courage to move forward, provided that we can create the environments and the conditions where people have access to land. The conference is going to be great advocacy to precisely resolve these "ifs." That's what it's all about. If everything else were correct, we wouldn't have a conference, would we? How else would you do it? Now, you tell me.

AITA: Yeah, I guess I meant maybe the conference, maybe then the conference is in some ways a booster, or a -- like a pep -- we call it in the United States a pep rally, to give people the "yes, it can be done". I mean, it's just that I kind of get discouraged, as in, whoa, there are so many problems.

N'DOW: But no conference has the money and a crock of gold waiting to dish out to people who come to it so that they can go and build their houses or improve their health. You are dealing with nothing less than bringing humanity around the table, decision-makers at all levels, and recognizing that this is critical to the human condition. That's what the United -- the United Nations is not a financing agency, it is an advocacy agency, it is an agency that encourages reflection and the pursuit of a better future. And that pursuit has to come from the collectivity that represents the United Nations. It is not -- let us not be misled into thinking that this organization is going to provide money. It is not. It's never done. Doesn't have it. But it has as its purpose the improvement of the human condition through advocacy, through any means that will bring the world together behind the common objective. And I think this is a very valuable objective.

ALDAY: Mr. N'Dow, when it comes to the final stage of this conference, it's always like the permanent division of North and South ideologic viewpoints, what is in your view the responsibility that the developed countries and the developing countries will have in this conference? Or should have?

N'DOW: Let me again correct a mis-impression. This conference is one of the few conferences where the North-South issue is muted. By that I mean it is not as accentuated as it usually is. The problem of urbanization and shelter exists equally in the North as it does in the South. There is in this sense a South and a North, because there are areas and pockets where the human habitat is as degraded in the North as in the South. The South and the North both have an interest in addressing this issue. I don't need to convince you; you walk around the streets of New York City, you will see what I mean. So indeed, we are facing a situation in which a common view and a common vision is called for, and in which it is most likely to be achieved because of this commonality of the challenge. Urbanization exists in Africa, it exists in North America, in Canada, in Asia, in South America: it is happening.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. N'Dow, in the few seconds we have left, which country has been most successful in licking the problem?

N'DOW: I wouldn't come here as a member of the United Nations Secretariat and start telling you which country has done best and which has done the worst. I think in general we must say that where people have had resources and the political will to change the human habitat, it is happening faster and perhaps better than in other places where the will doesn't exist and the resources don't exist.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. N'Dow, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of World Chronicle.

N'DOW: Yes, Michael.

LITTLEJOHNS: Our guest has been Dr. Wally N'Dow, Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, or HABITAT II. He was interviewed by Ricardo Alday of the Mexican News Agency and Judith Aita of USIA Press Service. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of World Chronicle.

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